DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 162 950 **SO 011 349**

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TITLE Conference on the Teaching of History (North Texas State University, Denton, Texas).
PUB DATE Oct 78
NOTE 12p.

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Achievement; *Change Strategies; College Curriculum; Course Organization; Curriculum Design; *Educational Improvement; *Educational Needs; *Educational Trends; Elementary Secondary Education; Higher Education; High School Curriculum; History; *History Instruction; Instructional Improvement; Knowledge Level; Relationship; Relevance (Education); *Social Studies; State of the Art Reviews; Student Motivation; Trend Analysis

ABSTRACT

Professional historians and public school personnel must combine efforts to improve the teaching of history in the public schools. Because no more than one-half of all high school graduates enter college, it is important for the public schools to provide quality history education. Recent research by groups such as the National Assessment of Educational Progress shows that students have not been learning general history, American history, or political theory very well. Reasons for the lack of emphasis on studying history include relaxed academic requirements by public schools and colleges, faddish emphasis upon other supposedly more relevant areas of study, and a lack of structure and continuity within existing history courses. The author suggests several approaches to reinstate effective history programs. First, there should be a revival of the basics in which schoolteachers will logically structure social studies courses to include reading, literacy, math, science, and history. This should be accompanied by a parallel revival of "general studies" and liberal arts in colleges and universities. Second, students should be provided with research tools and skills to stimulate their interest. Third, universities and professional historians should become involved in developing ways to improve the teaching of history in the public schools. (AV)

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CONFERENCE ON THE TEACHING OF HISTORY

NORTH TEXAS STATE UNIVERSITY
DENTON, TEXAS

October, 1978

Dr. Robert T. McGee, Superintendent
Denton Public Schools

SO-011349

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Dr. Robert T. McGee, Superintendent
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I am pleased to be here among this company of experts - serious students of history and those who care about the importance of this discipline. I am not a professional historian and thus I may be in the position of the farmer who ran his mule in the Kentucky Derby: He knew the mule would not win, but he thought the association might do him some good.

If we presume that no more than one-half of all high school graduates enter college (and that far fewer than that number complete college), it is clear that for a majority of our citizens, the only grasp of history most will achieve will be that provided by the public schools. I should think that this fact, coupled with the quality of the background that students bring with them to college, would be of special concern to the historian. It follows that the quality of teachers who share historical knowledge and insights and the quality of public school teaching would be of critical moment to this organization. Beyond these factors, we could address history as a cornerstone of the Liberal disciplines. That aspect is beyond dispute.

The great quotations (history thrives on those, does it not?) about the importance of history abound. Those which come to my mind are:

Herodotus: "What is past is prologue."

Santayana: "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."

In opposition, we have Henry Ford: "History is bunk," and the very American Satchell Page, "Don't look back, they may be gaining on you."

I fear that Henry and Satchell have the philosophical edge in contemporary society. While history remains popular among the hobbyist and TV script writers, as well as the professional historian, I find it hard to describe our times as being historically sensitive. The practical consequences to the Republic could be critical. I am not wise enough fully to define this circumstance, but I should like to offer some evidence of it and then suggest some ways in which both professional historians and the public schools might work together to fulfill a need. In a word, I propose that a symbiotic relationship ought to exist between the historian and the public schools.

First, the evidence. Currently, the studies by the National Assessment of Educational Progress - (the Commission of the States) offer clear evidence that both a knowledge of general history and American history and political theory in particular are not very effectively taught - at least they are not well learned. Worse yet, we find that large numbers of students do not grasp even the big picture and generalizations - let alone the subtleties of history.

a. National assessment measured knowledge, skills and attitudes in 1972 and in 1976. On the average, the percentage of 17 year olds giving acceptable answers drops by about 3 percentage points. Those living in affluent-urban environments show somewhat larger drops than the nation.

b. A 1975 Scholastic Magazine poll indicated that 60% of junior and senior high school students questioned the value of history.

c. In 1975, Richard Kirkendall wrote on the "Status of History in the Schools" in the Journal of American History and considered the decline in history both by state requirements and the general level of history teaching. He concluded that "signs of improvement are scarce."

d. The Purdue Studies of high school students over several years suggested that when basic Constitutional concepts were placed in practical context, a large number of students would deny the First Ten Amendments. One can call this a trick. If so, then society itself is a trick. We seldom face issues of citizen's rights in a pure context, thus, the principle becomes vitally important. If I do not understand what freedom of the press means, then it is of little consequence to me that a reporter goes to jail. While I believe that the public schools share in the responsibility for this state of affairs, schools are only part of the educational process.

e. There is other evidence, of course. The level of participation in electoral process and, concommitantly, the confidence in institutions and citizen apathy should give us pause. This apathy brings us Proposition 13 psychology. It brings contention, litigious minds and a narrow view of rights as opposed to social responsibility and the commonweal.

I hold firmly that historical knowledge and understanding related to social issues can, at least, provide some basis upon which we can respond to those issues in a logical, rational, and, indeed, a humane manner. I can recall what used to be called the "debunking period" (now I think it is called "psychohistory"). One teacher claimed that Washington caught his final and fatal cold as a result of a clandestine meeting with a young lady on a rainy night. Flexner never mentioned such an occurance, though he dealt objectively with the Parson Weems myth. But, what if he had found a flaw? I suspect he would still have called Washington the "indespensible man." We seem uncomfortable with heroes. The current (Nov.) Harpers discusses this in a piece by Henry Farilie, entitled "Too Rich for Heroes?" What Professor Morse has called "the hard-won decencies of civilization" deserves our attention, if not our homage.

Secondly, the changes in requirements by both the public schools and colleges are factors. Colleges have frequently reduced or watered down entrance requirements. Public schools have often followed suit under the banner of innovation or that great term of the 60's, "relevance." For years, the Social Studies have provided a collective for all the social sciences. I can defend this, in part. However, I remain concerned about what has happened to history in the process. Often, I fear, history has gotten crowded out as more and more miscellaneous (albeit interesting, but undemanding) detail gets substituted. Electives have sometimes been substituted for the real thing. The "History of Sports" may be interesting, but it is not the same as a quality course in the essence of history

especially if one has never studied the essence! Other disciplines (e.g., math and science) simply haven't had time for these games.

Third, a related problem is found, I think, in the cop-out involved in the term "explosion of learning." This is a specious idea that suggests that since we cannot teach all that is involved in a discipline, why teach any of it well or thoroughly. The opposite of this reaction is over-specialization which, of course, is both a necessity and a danger - especially at the college level. The pity is that teachers are often reinforced in their feelings that history is a confused jumble of facts, political intrigue, and meaningless minutia. They easily sense a lack of consistency and even a tentative structure and continuity. They sometimes learn that a course has no relation to the syllabus and that the survey course in American History can properly be left hanging at the outbreak of World War I. This problem is critical in the public school setting where there is even less time and less student motivation. To provide some priority and resolution, however tentative, is, I think, imperative. The other result can be a repetitive approach which lets students presume that they know more than they really know, simply because they studied the pilgrims three times.

Lest I be misunderstood, I am not suggesting that I would limit the historical training of teachers in some narrow way or that I would limit creativity. But there is no substitute for knowledge, however complemented it might be by experience. I am reminded of

one of the finest teachers I have ever known: A kindergarten teacher who held the M.A. in history! She was, without doubt, one of the best history teachers I have ever seen. My own grown children still remember her and the history she taught.

What are some of the responses to these needs? Allow me to share a few as I see them to be underway:

First, I see a revival of the basics in the broad sense. Reading, literacy, math, science, and history as real components in the Social Studies. The materials now available in both print and non-print have never been better. I see teachers as more committed to organizing and planning to accommodate more logical structured approaches - with all the cautions about generalization and their danger. I see geography, economics, and anthropology - as well as the fine arts worked into a whole relationship. In a word, I see more order and integration in the teaching of history. This does not preclude some analysis, interpretation, and even creative alternatives; it lays the basis for these.

The revival of "general studies" in some colleges seems to reassert the necessity for some basic discipline and liberal education. Perhaps this is a signal that the liberal arts shall be reinstated in our colleges. A vital part of the liberal arts involves the social sciences in general and history in particular. Clearly, colleges, as well as public schools, suffered from the relativity of the 1960's and the presumption that colleges were really special vocational schools where the practical needed to predominate. I am merely saying that part of the problem for

History and the Humanities in general at the public school level lies in the compromises made at the college level. I welcome the signs of reversal toward a balanced and humane program. I suspect this will require colleges to be less compromising in terms of requirements and, at the same time, create some priorities in terms of what is important. That process is underway in the public schools, I assure you.

Secondly, given some basic tools (including facts) students do respond and often become quite able young historians. Our own successful history clubs (including the Junior Historians) and ventures into oral history, have had assistance from this University. Certainly, "Roots," "The Ascent of Man," "Civilization," and other television programs have been motivating or at least complementary aspects of the revival. If Jefferson was right (and I think he was), about freedom and ignorance being mutually exclusive, then these revivals are imperative. As my colleague suggests, there is restructuring to be done. The movement for competency testing and accountability will not go away. The idea of basic education extends far beyond the 3-R's. These can all be positive signs and, frankly, I welcome them. We have been too concerned about the "positive self-image" in education and less concerned with content and meaning. One could make a case for the idea that good learning enhances the the self-image.

Third, I believe the expertise of the university needs to be focused upon more agreement about what should be included in the

public school curriculum. This should not be left solely to the "experts" in education. If teachers have good historical training of quality, we are willing to work with their methodology and creativity. But, we cannot teach them history - only colleges can do that. We cannot establish competency for reasonable historical knowledge, but you can. In sum, I am convinced that the university and the historian have a special role and responsibility in the improvement of the teaching of history and citizenship in the public schools.

The goal of all that I have said is more than balanced curriculum or even a more knowledgeable citizenry. I believe that my proposal has implications for our society's renewal and for the Republic itself. I think it is a goal that we share together.

In an age which prides itself on the creative, innovative, and the immediate, it seems well to remind ourselves of substance and the central core of which history is an essential ingredient. As one who has spent considerable time in refining curricula, I find that <u>there is no substitute for substance</u>. I support intuitive learning and creative perception, but I am reminded of the analogy of the prize-winning photographer who circumvents the first rule of photography: "Don't shoot into the light." The winner does this not out of ignorance, but because he knows the rule (the facts) so well.

In sum, I call for a joint concern of professional historians

and the public schools to seek ways to become more effective in the substance of teaching social science in general and history in particular in the public schools. The signs of progress are with us and I would have us strive together to extend this progress.

Thank you.

DR. ROBERT T. MC GEE

Dr. Robert T. McGee is superintendent of the Denton Independent School District. After military service in World War II, he completed the B. S. and Master's Degrees at the University of Cincinnati. He began his teaching career at the "Atomic City" of Los Alamos, New Mexico where he taught American History and English. Subsequently, he became a principal and later assistant superintendent for instruction - a position he also held in Bucks County Pennsylvania and Denton before becoming superintendent. He holds the doctorate in educational administration from the University of Northen Colorado.

Dr. McGee has published over forty articles in professional journals and two handbooks (Effective Supervision and Effective Teaching). His most recent publication for the American Association of School Administrators was entitled, "Basic Education: A Revival of the Central Promise," (The School Administrator, June, 1978). He holds membership in many professional and community organizations and is a member of the Denton Forum, a group dedicated to discussing critical issues. He is also a member of the National Commission on Youth, sponsored by the Kettering Foundation.

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